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THE OLD TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF SOCIAL OPPORTUNITY

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What new religious values we find in the Old Testament as soon as we come to see that prophets and lawgivers were facing the same sort of problems we face today! Where once was mysterious forecasting of the distant future, are vital, stirring messages of warning or encouragement. We hardly need nowadays to discuss the inspiration of the Old Testament. We know it must have been inspired because it inspires.

In the books of the Old Testament Christians believe they have a revelation from God. Being a divine revelation, it is authoritative; and being a revelation to man, it deals with the things that most concern mankind. In these books the things are revealed that pertain unto life and godliness. Nothing essential to man's life in the world is omitted.

In this paper we are not concerned with this revelation as a whole. We are here dealing with its teaching concerning one of the vital questions of our day. The social question, taking the term in its broad sense, is the overtopping question of our time—the question of the more just and equitable and Christian distribution of the advantages of life, the question how to deal with the problem of poverty on one hand and excessive wealth on the other, the question of bringing the disinherited into the family circle and insuring them a fair inheritance in life. This question is up for a hearing and it is going to be heard before the Supreme Court of the people. The church that can put men in the way of answering this question is the church that will best serve humanity in this hour of need. The church that avoids this ques-

tion or darkens counsel with empty words will not command much respect in the days to come.

In the past generations men have studied the Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New most diligently and minutely. This study has had several direct objects in view. Men have gone to the Old Testament to find foregleams and prophecies of Jesus Christ and his work. Men have studied most carefully the sacrificial system of Israel and have written volumes bearing upon the origin, meaning, and symbolism of this sacrificial system. But thus far comparatively little attention has been given to the moral and social legislation of Israel. This is all the more significant for the reason that the sacrificial and ceremonial elements in Judaism are the formal and transient elements, while the moral and social ideals are the essential and permanent elements. This is not all, but in these latter days various systems of Bible-study have been devised to take the pupils into all parts of the book and familiarize them with its contents. Much time and attention are given to the history of Israel, to the tabernacle and the temple, to the doctrinal material

in the Old Testament. But for some reason or lack of reason great sections of the book have been almost wholly overlooked. The people have had a fairly complete and connected statement of the Old Testament sacrificial system. But they have a very imperfect conception of the moral and social legislation of Israel. One could follow some of these systems of Bible-study for a lifetime without ever discovering that the Bible has any direct teaching on the social question as we call it. The Old Testament and the New we are beginning to see contain rich stores of material on such questions as press upon us today; and for one I believe that the time has come for us to know this material, to find its great underlying principles, and teach the people how to apply those principles in modern society. In this study I am not attempting to consider all of the Old Testament teaching that is in any way related to the social question; I am rather calling attention to the fact that the Old Testament is very explicit on this subject, and I am seeking to find the underlying principles in one small section of that legislation.

I. The Old Testament Teaching on Social Opportunity

In this brief study we are not concerned with the dates and authorship of any particular documents. Such inquiries have value, no doubt, and throw much light upon the text, and often give the key to its interpretation. Whatever may be the date of these writings, they contain teachings which express the consciousness of Israel on these questions; they set forth the teachings of the great men of God whether lawgivers or prophets. Several things may be noted

in the Old Testament teaching on the subject before us.

a) The poor are to be upheld, are to be given a chance to get on their feet and recover their position. "And if thy brother be waxen poor and his hand fail with thee; then thou shalt uphold him: as a stranger and a sojourner shall he live with thee. Take thou no usury of him or increase; but fear thy God: that thy brother may live with thee. Thou shalt not give him thy money upon usury, nor give him thy victuals for increase" (Lev. 25:35-38). "And if thou lend money to any of my people with thee that is poor, thou shalt not be to him as a creditor; neither shall ye lay upon him usury. If thou at all take thy neighbor's garment to pledge, thou shalt restore it unto him by that the sun goeth down" (Exod. 22:25-27).

b) The stranger and the poor are to be given a chance. "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shalt gather in the increase thereof; but the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie fallow; that the poor of thy people may eat; and what they leave the beast of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard" (Exod. 23:9-12; cf. Lev. 25:1-7).

c) The owner of the field or vineyard may not take everything but must leave something for the poor and fatherless. "And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard,

neither shalt thou gather the fallen fruit of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and for the stranger, I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:9-10). "I am Jehovah your God" (cf. Lev. 23:22 and Deut. 24:19-24; Lev. 25:8-17).

d) The Jubilee legislation recognizes the family ownership of the land, it sought to erect a bar to the monopoly of land, to prevent the rise of a permanently landless class without any true inheritance in the nation, and to secure an equalization of opportunity in each generation. "I am Jehovah your God." It may be noted that this solemn affirmation is made emphatic in connection with these laws of social opportunity and distributive justice.

II. The Social Principles of Judaism

In form this legislation is local, ancient, transient, and Jewish. But beneath the letter of the law there are great principles which are universal, modern, abiding, and Christian. The Son of Man affirms that he has come not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them. "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled" (Math. 5:17, 18). And he declares that whosoever shall do and teach these commandments even the least of them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

1. One principle in the Jewish legislation is this: The earth and its resources are the common heritage of the people. The Mosaic legislation is based upon the fact that the Promised Land is given to the people of Israel. The land was allotted by tribes, and the tribal portion was apportioned to families. The family and not the individual owned the soil.

The Jubilee legislation recognized this principle and was designed to do two things: to prevent the rise in Israel of a large landowning class, and to prevent no less the rise of a permanent landless class. This legislation recognized the fact that there are some persons who from one cause or another find it difficult to maintain their footing; it recognized the other fact that in every society there are some men who are ready to take advantage of their brothers' weakness and inefficiency, and use these as a means to their own ends. For many years the rich man might join house to house and lay field to field till there was no place where the poor man might rest; for many years the poor man might be kept out of his ancestral estate, but his children could not be hopelessly handicapped. For, after a time, this process of land monopoly must cease, and the lands revert to their original owners. The whole tendency and aim of this Jubilee system was to make land monopoly impossible and to prevent the rise of a permanent landholding class that should control all the strategic points. And the whole tendency and aim of this system, on the other side, was to renew in every generation the conditions of a moral life and to declare that one generation should not be put out of the race by the action of a previous one. This legislation sought to broaden the way of success for all, to put a limit to the greed and cruelty of men, to give every one a fair start in life with a just inheritance in society (Lev. 25:10-13). The members of each generation possess at best a kind of use-possession of the land. And the people of each generation are to have a fair and free access to the land. No one

man, no one generation of men could gain possession of the earth and hold it against other men and other generations. An individual might be poor and landless today, but his children are not thereby hopelessly disbarred and handicapped. Every generation has its rights in the land, its equities in the national inheritance. In every generation there is to be a renewal of opportunity that every man may have a chance to regain his footing in the nation.

2. The poor need not charity, but opportunity. The Old Testament knows nothing of charity in our sense of the word. The Jewish legislation in fact is opposed to charity in the form of alms and gifts. The poor are to be given an opportunity to help themselves. The poor fatherless, the widow, the stranger are not beggars existing by sufferance and living upon the charity of the more fortunate. By the way, we have an interesting confirmation of this in a remarkable parable of the Master. Dives allowed the beggar to lie at his gate and he gave him the crumbs from his table. But the object at his gate was a mere beggar and not as a man; he tried to satisfy the relation between man and his brother with crumbs; he gave the beggar charity but did not secure a man justice. And Jesus said that he disobeyed the law and the prophets and went to the place of torment.

The poor and fatherless according to the Old Testament had some rights in the land. The men in possession of the earth could not claim an exclusive and absolute possession. A man might cultivate his field and might reap it for six years. But the poor man without possession had some equi-

ties and could take as a matter of right what grew of itself the seventh year. The purpose of the sabbatic year no doubt was to prevent soil exhaustion and to give the land a rest. But this recognizes the same principle that the man in possession cannot use the soil as he pleases. Other men and other generations have some equities which must be conserved.

The same principle is recognized in the law of *gleaning*. A man may harvest his field and take the crop. But he is not entitled to the last head of grain and the last bunch of grapes. The poor and fatherless have some rights which must be protected. A man in possession may take enough for his own use, but he may not claim all; he may not foreclose the opportunity of the needy and the weak. "I am the Lord Thy God."

III. The Application of these Social Principles

The first thing is for the church to study the Old Testament legislation as a whole and to come to some definite mind with reference to it. Some would tell us that the Old Testament is an outgrown book and has no real meaning to the world today. If this is the case, then it is time that the church accepted this conclusion and laid the book aside as a last-year's almanac. If this is the case, it is an utter waste of time for young people and old to spend so much time studying it. Such study may be of great interest to antiquarians but has little value to the rank and file. Others assert that the letter of the Old Testament law is outgrown but that the underlying principles

abide and are of eternal value. This, I believe, is the New Testament view of the Old. As a matter of fact the Son of Man regards himself as the heir of Judaism and the fulfiller of its law. He builds upon the Old but he goes beyond it. He interprets the Old and enlarges it. What before was local and Jewish he makes universal and permanent. What before was a matter of commandment and statute he makes a matter of spirit and principle. But be it noted the New does not mean less than the Old; neither are its principles more limited or more vague. The Old Testament moral and social legislation in its underlying and abiding principles is the moral minimum for the Christian world. Not less than that of Judaism but much more is the Christian requirement. The Christian is not shut up to the mere letter of the Old Testament law; but he is not absolved from all obligations; he is not free to do as he pleases. The Christ has come fulfilling the law, says Paul, in order that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit (Rom. 8:4).

But here we meet one of those anomalies that is as strange as it is unworthy. We find men everywhere who take this view of the Old Testament and its teaching, but they quietly ignore great sections and never seek to find out their meaning. Others see its bearing in part, but they frankly say that it is not possible and practicable in our modern complex society. Which is the worse unbelief: Is it the denial of the man who says that God has never spoken to the world and we have no authoritative revelation of his will? Or

is it rather the unbelief of the man who affirms that God has given us a revelation final and authoritative, but after all it is not practicable and possible?

Accepting the conclusion that in the Old Testament we have some principles that have eternal validity, what do these principles fairly imply with reference to social opportunity? Let it be said, however, that I am not here attempting to interpret these principles in detail or to suggest a program of social action. It is enough for us to know that these are great, divine principles on this subject of distributive justice; and it is much for us to have a sense of direction for tomorrow's march.

a) That the earth and its resources are to be held in trust for all and must not become the exclusive monopoly of the few. There is not a religion in the world that does not oppose the present system of monopoly of the earth and its resources. There never has been a people on the globe that did not recognize in some way the fundamental principle of social ownership. Yet in spite of religion, in contradiction of the people's consciousness, there has grown up a system which is as false in principle as it is injurious to Society.

b) That every person born into the nation has some equities in the national heritage. Every life has some meaning in the total meaning of the world. Every life has some value in the kingdom of God. Every life born into the national family has an heir's rights in the world. The time has come for us to recognize these principles which are so fundamental in Christianity and so certain in justice, and to seek to get those principles applied. This does not

mean an equal division of the national wealth as some seem to suppose; in fact it is the direct opposite of that. But it does mean that no class of men should be permitted to gain possession of the earth and its resources and hold those resources to the disadvantage of the people. It does mean that the men of one generation who may have gained control of the earth and its resources shall not be permitted to exercise the dead-hand control over those resources to the disinheritance of the people themselves. It does mean that the resources of society are to be held in trust for the least and lowliest member of the family and that he is to receive an heir's position in the form of an adequate education and a fair opportunity in life.

In a crude and limited way we recognize this principle in our charitable work. Society confesses an obligation to feed the hungry family, to care for the man that is down, and to provide for the child that is dependent. We accept the duty of lifting up those who have fallen; the Jewish law emphasized the duty of keeping men on their feet. We feed the poor and hungry; the divine law requires us to uphold the poor and enable them to regain their footing.

c) That there is to be a continual renewal of opportunities in every generation. The fact that some men control a large proportion of the earth's resources, the fact that our present law and custom permit these men to transmit this property from fathers to children, does not prove that this system is either socially just or morally right. The fact that so many children are born in poverty and have few

advantages in life, the fact that these disinherited children can plead no claims in law to any land or property, does not prove that this condition is either necessary or unchangeable. The fact that these inequalities exist is rather a reason why we should question the right of such conditions to continue and should endeavor to change them. For we must recognize the fact that this property has come to some men not through labor and merit of their own, as this poverty is due not to the demerit of those particular children. The principles before us summon us to the task of widening the door of opportunity for all, to put a limit to the greed and power of men, to give everyone a fair start in life and a just inheritance in society. Society has the difficult duty of encouraging and aiding unimpeded activity in every class, and at the same time renewing its conditions in each class. The race is to be renewed morning, noon, and night on equal terms. Again: "Society is to strive for a perpetual renewal of opportunities and redistribution of advantages, so that every child shall come from the cradle to a fresh world with fresh incentives, not to one overworn and used up for him by the errors of past generations" (Bascom, *Sociology*, pp. 45, 254). This principle is clear and positive, and it will gain an increasing recognition as men become more just and society becomes more Christian.

The thorough study of the social teaching of the Old Testament and the New, the fearless interpretation of that teaching in terms of modern life and conditions, the giving to men of a sense of direction in social thought and effort,

and the development in men of an impulse to go out and make the divine principles of that teaching regnant in human society, define one of the most important tasks before the church at this hour.

THE SOURCE OF OUR INFORMATION REGARDING THE LIFE OF JESUS

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For the past three years the historicity of Jesus has been discussed with increasing freedom. And in very truth it is a matter of supreme importance. But the questions the discussion has raised are not to be settled by ingenious guesses patchworked together into academic theses. "Back to the sources!" That is the one reliable watchword. And the sources? Professor Miller discusses them sanely and constructively.

If we were deprived of our Four Gospels, our information regarding the life of Jesus would be extremely meager.

Strangely enough, Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived in the latter half of the first century and wrote at length about the Jews, does not mention Jesus, that is, in what is considered his genuine writing. Tacitus, however, speaks of a certain "Christus" who was put to death in the days of Pilate, probably our Jesus.

Paul, the earliest New Testament writer, gives us only scanty references to Jesus' earthly life. Whether he knew much about the details is an open question. It is hard to believe that he did not and yet hard to see why he refers to them so little if he did. The reason may be found in the fact that the center of his interest was in the "Risen Christ." "I know not Christ after the flesh," says Paul. Whether that means that he

actually did not know, or that he deliberately put aside such knowledge in favor of a higher and a better knowledge, is hard to say. Paul preached Christ crucified and risen; the death explaining the new relation of Christians to the law and to sin, the resurrection revealing the new life in the Spirit. Thus his testimony is historically valuable, in the present connection, at two points, chiefly, but two very important points—the death of Christ and the resurrection. Concerning the teaching of Jesus, the Pauline epistles contain only four definite quotations and a few other allusions.

The other New Testament epistles have few historical references, are all later than the gospels themselves, and so are of little independent value for the life of Jesus. The Apocalypse gives us little or nothing and the Book of Acts is the second volume of a work of which Luke is volume one; hence it usually